

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Rules

BILL: CS/SB 50

INTRODUCER: Governmental Oversight and Accountability Committee and Senator Negron

SUBJECT: Public Meetings

DATE: March 4, 2013 REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Naf	McVaney	GO	Fav/CS
2.	McSwain	Hansen	AP	Favorable
3.	McSwain	Phelps	RC	Pre-meeting
4.				
5.				
6.				

Please see Section VIII. for Additional Information:

A. COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE..... Statement of Substantial Changes

B. AMENDMENTS..... Technical amendments were recommended

Amendments were recommended

Significant amendments were recommended

I. Summary:

CS/SB 50 requires that members of the public be given a reasonable opportunity to be heard on a proposition before a board or commission of a state agency or local government. Such opportunity does not have to occur at the same meeting at which the board or commission takes official action if certain requirements are met. The bill excludes specified meetings and acts from the “right to speak” requirement.

The bill specifies that the section does not prohibit a board or commission from maintaining orderly conduct or proper decorum in a public meeting. It authorizes a board or commission to adopt certain reasonable rules or policies governing the opportunity to be heard. If a board or commission adopts such rules or policies and thereafter complies with them, it is deemed to be acting in compliance with the section.

The fiscal impact of this bill is indeterminate. See Section V.

The bill authorizes a circuit court to issue injunctions for the purpose of enforcing the section upon the filing of an application for such injunction by any citizen of Florida. If an action is filed against a board or commission to enforce the provisions of the section and the court determines

that the board or commission violated the section, the bill requires the court to assess reasonable attorney fees against the appropriate state agency or local government board or commission. However, the bill also authorizes the court to assess reasonable attorney fees against the individual filing the action if the court finds that the action was filed in bad faith or was frivolous. The bill excludes specified public officers from its attorney fee provisions. A court is required by the bill to assess reasonable attorney fees if a board or commission appeals a court order finding that such board or commission violated the section and the order is affirmed.

The bill provides that any action taken by a board or commission that is found to be in violation of the section is not void as a result of such violation.

This bill creates section 286.0114, Florida Statutes.

II. Present Situation:

Florida Constitution: Public Meetings

The Florida Constitution requires all meetings of any collegial public body of the executive branch of state government or of any collegial public body of a county, municipality, school district, or special district, at which official acts are to be taken or at which public business of such body is to be transacted or discussed, to be open and noticed to the public.¹

Government in the Sunshine Law

Access to government meetings is also governed by the Florida Statutes. Section 286.011, F.S., also known as the “Government in the Sunshine Law” or “Sunshine Law,” requires all meetings of any board or commission of any state agency or authority or of any agency or authority of any county, municipal corporation, or political subdivision, at which official acts are to be taken to be open to the public at all times. The board or commission must provide reasonable notice of all public meetings. Public meetings may not be held in certain locations that discriminate on the basis of sex, age, race, creed, color, origin, or economic status or which operates in a manner that unreasonably restricts the public’s access to the facility.² Minutes of a meeting of any such board or commission of any such state agency or authority shall be promptly recorded and be open to public inspection.³

Right to Speak at Public Meetings

The Florida Constitution and the Florida Statutes are silent concerning whether citizens have a right to be heard at a public meeting. To date, Florida courts have heard two cases concerning whether a member of the public has a right to be heard at a meeting when he or she is not a party to the proceedings.

¹ Article I, s. 24(b) of the Florida Constitution.

² Section 286.011(6), F.S.

³ Section 286.011(2), F.S.

In *Keesler v. Community Maritime Park Associates, Inc.*,⁴ the plaintiffs alleged that the Community Maritime Park Associates, Inc., (CMPA)⁵ violated the Sunshine Law by not providing them the opportunity to speak at a public meeting concerning the development of certain waterfront property. The plaintiffs argued that the Sunshine Law phrase “open to the public” grants citizens the right to speak at public meetings, but the First District Court of Appeal held that no such right exists:

Relying on the language in *Marston*⁶, the trial court determined that, although the Sunshine Law requires that meetings be open to the public, the law does not give the public the right to speak at the meetings. Appellants have failed to point to any case construing the phrase “open to the public” to grant the public the right to speak, and in light of the clear and unambiguous language in *Marston* (albeit dicta), we are not inclined to broadly construe the phrase as granting such a right here.⁷

In the second case, *Kennedy v. St. Johns Water Management District*, the plaintiffs alleged, in part, that the St. Johns Water Management District violated the Sunshine Law by preventing certain people from speaking at a public meeting concerning the proposed approval of a water use permit.⁸ There, the trial court held that, “Because, as clearly articulated in *Keesler*, the Sunshine Law does not require the public be allowed to speak, plaintiffs’ claim ... fails as a matter of law.”⁹ The Fifth District Court of Appeal affirmed the trial court’s ruling.¹⁰

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill creates s. 286.0114, F.S., providing that members of the public must be given a reasonable opportunity to be heard on a proposition before a board or commission of any state agency or authority or of any agency or authority of any county, municipal corporation, or political subdivision. The opportunity to be heard does not have to occur at the same meeting at which the board or commission takes official action on the proposition if such opportunity:

⁴ 32 So.3d 659 (Fla. 1st DCA 2010).

⁵ The CMPA is a not-for-profit corporation charged by the City of Pensacola with overseeing the development of a parcel of public waterfront property. The CMPA did not dispute that it was subject to the requirements of the Sunshine Law. *Id.* at 660. A private entity is generally subject to public records and open meetings laws when 1) there has been a delegation of the public agency’s governmental functions; or 2) the private entity plays an integral part in the decision-making process of the public agency or has a significant level of involvement with the public agency’s performance of its duties. *See Ops. Att’y Gen. Fla. 92-53* (1992) (direct support organization created for purpose of assisting public museum subject to s. 286.011, F.S.); *83-95* (1983) (where county accepted services of nongovernmental committee to recodify and amend county’s zoning laws, committee subject to Sunshine Law).

⁶ In *Wood v. Marston*, the Florida Supreme Court held that the University of Florida improperly closed meetings of a committee charged with soliciting and screening applicants for the deanship of the university’s college of law. However, the *Marston* court noted “nothing in this decision gives the public the right to be more than spectators. The public has no authority to participate in or to interfere with the decision-making process.” *Wood v. Marston*, 442 So.2d 934, 941 (Fla. 1983).

⁷ *Keesler*, *supra* note 3, at 660-61.

⁸ The trial court was the Circuit Court of the Seventh Judicial Circuit, in and for Putnam County, Florida. *See* the trial court’s “Order Granting Motion for Summary Judgment,” September 28, 2010, at 1-3 (on file with the Governmental Oversight and Accountability Committee).

⁹ *Id.* at 6.

¹⁰ 2011 WL 5124949 (Fla. 5th DCA 2011).

- Occurs at a meeting that meets the same notice requirements as the meeting at which the board or commission takes official action on the item;
- Occurs at a meeting that is during the decision-making process; and
- Is within reasonable proximity in time before the meeting at which the board or commission takes the official action.

The bill specifies that the section does not prohibit a board or commission from maintaining orderly conduct or proper decorum in a public meeting.

The opportunity to be heard does not apply to:

- An official act that must be taken to deal with an emergency situation affecting the public health, welfare, or safety, when compliance with the requirements would cause an unreasonable delay in the ability of the board or commission to act;
- An official act involving no more than a ministerial act;
- A meeting that is exempt from open meetings requirements; or
- Meetings in which the board or commission is acting in a quasi-judicial capacity. The bill specifies that this exclusion does not affect the right of a person to be heard as otherwise provided by law.

The bill authorizes a board or commission to adopt reasonable rules or policies governing the opportunity to be heard.¹¹ Such rules or policies must be limited to those that:

- Provide guidelines regarding the time an individual has to address the board or commission;
- Prescribe procedures for allowing representatives of groups or factions on a proposition to address the board or commission, rather than all members of such groups or factions, at meetings in which a large number of individuals wish to be heard;
- Prescribe procedures or forms for an individual to use in order to inform the board or commission of a desire to be heard, to indicate his or her support, opposition, or neutrality on a proposition, and to indicate his or her designation of a representative to speak for him or her or his or her group on a proposition if he or she so chooses; or
- Designate a specified period of time for public comment.

The bill provides that a board or commission is deemed to be acting in compliance with the new section if the board or commission adopts rules or policies in compliance with the section and follows such rules or policies when providing an opportunity to be heard.

The bill authorizes a circuit court to issue injunctions for the purpose of enforcing the new section upon the filing of an application for such injunction by any citizen of Florida.

¹¹ Executive branch agencies that are subject to the Florida Administrative Procedure Act (ch. 120, F.S.) *must* adopt through the rulemaking process (s. 120.54, F.S.) any agency statement defined as a rule by s. 120.52, F.S. Section 120.52(16), F.S., defines “rule” to mean each agency statement of general applicability that implements, interprets, or prescribes law or policy or describes the procedure or practice requirements of an agency and includes any form which imposes any requirement or solicits any information not specifically required by statute or by an existing rule.

Whenever an action is filed against a board or commission to enforce the provisions of this section, the bill requires the court to assess reasonable attorney fees against the appropriate state agency or local government board or commission if the court determines that the defendant to such action acted in violation of the section. The bill also authorizes the court to assess reasonable attorney fees against the individual filing such an action if the court finds that the action was filed in bad faith or was frivolous. These attorney fee provisions do not apply to a state attorney, to his or her duly authorized assistants, or to an officer charged with enforcing the provisions of the act. The bill also requires a court to assess reasonable appellate attorney fees if a board or commission appeals any court order which has found such board or commission to have violated the section and the order is affirmed.

The bill specifies that any action taken by a board or commission that is found to be in violation of the section is not void as a result of such violation.

The bill's effective date is October 1, 2013.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

The county/municipality mandates provision of s. 18, Art. VII of the Florida Constitution may apply because this bill could cause counties and municipalities to incur additional expenses associated with longer meetings or increased meetings due to the new requirement that the public be provided with the opportunity to speak at such meetings.¹² An exemption may apply, however, if the bill has an insignificant fiscal impact. If an exemption does not apply, an exception may still apply if the bill articulates a finding of serving an important state interest and applies to all persons similarly situated. The bill contains a legislative finding of important state interest and applies to boards and commissions of all state agencies and authorities and all agencies and authorities of counties, municipal corporations, and political subdivisions; therefore, it appears to apply to all persons similarly situated.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

¹² Article VII, s. 18(a) of the Florida Constitution provides that no county or municipality may be bound by any general law that mandates it to spend funds or take an action requiring the expenditure of funds unless the Legislature determines that such law fulfills an important state interest *and* one of specified other requirements are met. The other specified requirements are:

- Funds have been appropriated that have been estimated at the time of enactment to be sufficient to fund such expenditure;
- The Legislature authorizes or has authorized a county or municipality to enact a funding source not available for such county or municipality on February 1, 1989, that can be used to generate the amount of funds estimated to be sufficient to fund such expenditure by a simple majority vote of the governing body of each such county or municipality;
- The law requiring such expenditure is approved by two-thirds of the membership in each house of the Legislature;
- The expenditure is required to comply with a law that applies to all persons similarly situated, including the state and local governments; *or*
- The law is required to either comply with a federal requirement or required for eligibility for a federal entitlement, which federal requirement specifically contemplates actions by counties or municipalities for compliance. *Id.*

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:**A. Tax/Fee Issues:**

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

Governmental entities may incur additional meeting related expenses because longer meetings may be required when considering items of great public interest. The amount of those potential expenses is indeterminate and will vary depending on the magnitude of each issue and the specific associated meeting requirements.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:**Rulemaking**

The constitutional separation of powers doctrine¹³ prevents the Legislature from delegating its constitutional duties.¹⁴ Because legislative power involves the exercise of policy-related discretion over the content of law,¹⁵ any discretion given an executive branch agency to implement a law must be “pursuant to some minimal standards and guidelines ascertainable by reference to the enactment establishing the program.”¹⁶ Although the bill authorizes, but does not require, state agency boards and commissions to adopt certain rules or policies, executive branch agencies are required to adopt as a rule a statement of general applicability that implements law or policy and that imposes a requirement not specifically required by statutes or existing rule.¹⁷ The bill prescribes the items that such rules or policies may address.

Boards and commissions subject to the state Administrative Procedure Act¹⁸ must comply with the rulemaking procedures set forth in that chapter. Generally, rulemaking pursuant to those procedures takes a minimum of 90 days.¹⁹

¹³ Article II, s. 3 of the Florida Constitution.

¹⁴ See *Florida State Bd. of Architecture v. Wasserman*, 377 So.2d 653 (Fla. 1979).

¹⁵ See *State ex rel. Taylor v. City of Tallahassee*, 177 So. 719 (Fla. 1937).

¹⁶ See *Askew v. Cross Key Waterways*, 372 So.2d 913 (Fla. 1978).

¹⁷ See note 11.

¹⁸ Chapter 120, F.S. The chapter applies to any “agency” as defined in s. 120.52(1), F.S.

¹⁹ See s. 120.54, F.S.

Other Comments

The bill does not define the terms “proposition,” “reasonable proximity,” “ministerial act,” “factions,” and “groups.”

The bill does not specify what is considered an “unreasonable delay” when deciding if the public’s opportunity to be heard should be usurped.

It is unclear whether a state board’s or commission’s denial of someone’s right to speak may constitute an agency action challengeable under the Administrative Procedure Act. In cases in which an administrative remedy is available, a plaintiff may be required to exhaust all administrative remedies before pursuing a civil remedy.²⁰

As currently drafted, each state or local board or commission is authorized to create its own rules or policies governing the right to speak. Allowing each state board or commission to create its own rules allows it to tailor its rules to its needs, but may not provide as much ease of use by the public as would uniform rules created by an entity such as the Administration Commission.

The bill specifies that a circuit court may issue injunctions to enforce the provisions of the act. It is unclear whether this could be interpreted to exclude civil remedies other than injunctions and the attorney fees also explicitly authorized by the bill.

VIII. Additional Information:

- A. **Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:**
(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

CS by Governmental Oversight and Accountability on February 6, 2013:

The CS differs from the original bill in that it:

- Creates a definition for “board or commission” for drafting clarity. The substance of the definition is pulled from the original bill.
- Clarifies that an opportunity to speak must occur at a meeting that is within reasonable proximity in time to the meeting at which the board or commission takes official action on the proposition.
- Specifies that the section does not prohibit a board or commission from maintaining orderly conduct or proper decorum in a public meeting.
- Changes the term “item” to “proposition” throughout the bill for conformity.
- Deletes the phrase “with respect to the rights or interests of a person” from (3)(d) to prevent confusion over whom or what constitutes a “person.”
- Clarifies that the restrictions on rules and policies apply only to those governing the opportunity to be heard.
- Rephrases (4)(a), relating to specifying a limit on the time an individual has to address a board or commission, to provide more flexibility by instead specifying that a board or commission may provide guidelines relating to the time an individual may speak.

²⁰ See, for example, *Orange County, Fla. v. Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission*, 397 So.2d 411 (Fla. 5th DCA 1981).

- Rephrases (4)(b), relating to requiring a selection of a representative of a group or faction, to provide more flexibility by instead specifying that a board or commission may prescribe procedures for allowing representatives of a group or faction to address the board or commission.
- Replaces the phrase “it is presumed that” in (5) with “is deemed to be” to prevent confusion about whether the subsection is creating a rebuttable legal presumption.
- Relocates the authorization of a circuit court to issue injunctions before the attorney fee provisions for drafting clarity.
- Replaces the authorization of the circuit courts to issue injunctions with a circuit court for drafting clarity.
- Authorizes attorney fees at the appellate level in addition to at the circuit court level if a board or commission is found to have violated the section.
- Replaces references within the bill to “the act” with “the section” for clarity.
- Adds a finding of important state interest.
- Changes the bill’s effective date to from July 1, 2013 to October 1, 2013 to allow boards and commissions subject to ch. 120, F.S., to promulgate rules.

B. Amendments:

None.